Interview with James Figgs

Tuesday, May 18, 2010

For the American Music Archives at the University of Mississippi

The interview was for the ongoing project to interview people involved in the making of religious music in the North Mississippi area to be archived in the American Music Archives within the University’s Special Collections at the J.D. Williams Library on Campus.

Miles Laseter interviewed James Figgs at about 10:00am on Tuesday morning at his office in the broadcast studio building for KBUD 102.1 FM in Sardis, Mississippi. The building is located at 627 East Lee Street, Sardis, Mississippi 38666. The building is on Mississippi Scenic Road 315 which is also called East Lee Street at this location. It is about a block or two east of Interstate 55 off of exit 252. I helped with the interview by monitoring the audio recording and asking some follow up questions at the end or interjecting with a question when I felt clarification of some information might be needed.

Mr. Figgs came to the station at the request of Mr. Kerney as a last minute replacement for some gospel music artists that Mr. Kerney tried to arrange for us to meet that morning. He called Mr. Figgs and asked that he come in to talk to us and Mr. Figgs was there within about thirty minutes.

James Figgs has been a radio show host and party DJ for over thirty years from the Delta town of Marks in Quitman County, Mississippi. He started out as a blues DJ and quit playing blues shortly after he became a member of a church and started playing gospel on Sunday mornings. He did not give his birth date or age during the interview but he appeared to be in his late sixties to possibly his late seventies. He indicated that he and his mother were both activists in the civil rights movement and he would be a great resource for further interviews on the topic.

Mr. Figgs was eager to talk to us and was enthusiastic about our project to record and archive these oral histories. He emphasized that the culture of gospel music was of great historical and social significance within the African American community. He reiterated some of the same points that Mr. Kerney talked about concerning the use of gospel music as a safe and peaceful social tool during a time of repression, then he gave many examples of the way he had personally used his gospel radio show as a means of facilitating activism to affect positive social change from the time of the Civil Rights movement to the current day.
When asked about his biographical information, he said he went first to a community college on an athletic scholarship. Then he received his bachelors degree in political science. He said he was in the process of getting a graduate degree in social work from a Pentecostal school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina when he was expelled from school for protesting policies at that school. He said he worked with Fannie Lou Hamer doing voter registrations and did similar types of activist work. He said he got interested in social activism because his mother was an activist. Her name was Ruthie Elizabeth Figgs. He said she worked with Dorothy Height and she brought Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to Quitman County in the Delta and she organized the Mule Train to Washington. He is currently involved with the state NAACP and the Democratic Caucus.

He talked about how he uses his show to play gospel music and in between songs he uses his program to do social outreach and he talks about subjects such as voter registration or about the issues surrounding Barack Obama as President or as a community bulletin board for announcements and so on.

He talked of Mr. Kerney in a high regard concerning all the work that Ederic Kerney and his wife put into creating a full time gospel radio station. I do not remember if he mentioned it on the recorded interview, but before the interview he talked about how the stations used to give a few hours of gospel programming every Sunday morning for free so that they could satisfy the FCC requirements that a certain amount of time be allotted each week for public service announcements. So the African American community took advantage of that free time to create gospel shows that could then be used for social outreach in much the same way Mr. Kerney talked about using gospel songs in the fields to send messages that they could not talk about otherwise, such as when and where meetings were going to be held.

As I stated before, James Figgs would be a great resource to follow up with other interviews for anyone interested in the Civil Rights movement in the Mississippi Delta.